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ABSTRACT

Distance education course designers should be careful to ensure that the instructional materials they create are not only oriented towards the learners, but also that they do not make exorbitant demands on the teachers who are expected to use them. The materials should help the teacher to take advantage of the media available without undermining the confidence of the teacher. The materials should be simple, highly structured and activity oriented, containing many reviews with frequent tests. The contents should be as much as possible designed for high interest and relevance. Extension activities for weaker and stronger students should also be included. Although a highly structured syllabus is desirable, it should not be restrictive and used to constrain imaginative teachers. The materials should be learning-centered rather than learner-centered and serve to make the teacher's instructional tasks easier to do. (Author)

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Creating distance education instructional materials for use by ordinary teachers

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ABSTRACT

Distance education course designers should be careful to ensure that the instructional materials they create are not only oriented towards the learners, but also that they do not make exorbitant demands on the teachers who are expected to use them. The materials should help the teacher to take advantage of the media available without undermining the confidence of the teacher. The materials should be simple, highly structured and activity oriented, containing many reviews with frequent tests. The contents should be as much as possible designed for high interest and relevance. Extension activities for weaker and stronger students should also be included. Although a highly structured syllabus is desirable, it should not be restrictive and used to constrain imaginative teachers. The materials should be learning-centered rather than learner-centered and serve to make the teachers' instructional tasks easier to do.

Creating distance education instructional materials for ordinary teachers

Distance education teachers, even more than teachers in traditional classrooms are expected to be imaginative and innovative in their approach. Experts dream up standards to which teachers are expected to conform in order to ensure that learning takes place. In addition, most instructional materials have been written for teachers working in normal face-to-face learning environments. Distance education teachers often find these instructional materials difficult to work with. Teachers who use materials that have been found to be effective in the classroom often discover that these same materials are not useful in teleconferencing or in other distance education modes. Less experienced teachers sometimes blame themselves rather than the shortcomings in the materials they are using, often becoming pessimistic about their own professional competence.

Consequently, distance education course designers should be careful to ensure that the instructional materials while providing the learners with meaningful educational opportunities, do not make exorbitant demands on teachers, assigning them tasks that are very difficult to perform in the media available. Furthermore, the materials should not undermine teachers' confidence. Rather, more emphasis should be placed on finding, creating and designing materials that are simple and effective enough to be used by many different teachers under a great variety of distance

learning situations, taking full advantage of the teaching modes available. While providing the students with the basis for a valid learning experience, the materials must make the job of the distance education teacher easier to do.

No one can deny the central role of the teacher in fostering an active and directed environment and promoting learning in the classroom. However, we cannot assume that the ideal dedicated teaching professional is the norm. Most of us would be happy with adaptable teachers who have a positive attitude towards distance educational media, who spend every waking hour dreaming up and organizing new projects for their classes, and who are capable of communicating effectively over the telephone ensuring that their classes are always educationally enlightening experiences. However, we must recognize that it is not always possible for teachers to put in many hours of preparation and remain on their toes maintaining a high intensity learning environment for every lesson, every day. In distance education, this problem can be compounded because of the difficulties inherent in personalizing and individualizing the material for students physically separated from the teacher.

This concern for the position of the teacher as well as other participants in the educational process was noted by Hutchinson & Waters (1984) who feel that the term *learner-centered* is misleading. Often, they claim, learner-centered programs become learner-dominated, where the learner is the sole focus of the learning process. A better term, they suggest is *learning-centered*, which would take into account the needs and expectations of all the parties concerned (the students, the teacher, the technical personnel, the community, etc.) In distance education course design, the possibilities and the limitations of the new media must also be considered, as well as the attitudes and prejudices towards the new technology of all the different parties. In particular, the role of teachers must be addressed.

Many distance education instructors also teach regular classroom courses. Their distance education duties are often in addition to, or comprise only one part of their teaching assignment. Some of these instructors are in small schools where they have to teach a broad variety of courses involving a great deal of preparation time, and so find that they cannot devote the time they would like to their distance education course. Many are inexperienced. Others are afraid of

the new technology and have little or no training in using the media.

Pity the poor teachers who find that a number of their students have high anxiety problems or are even openly hostile. It is futile to pretend that these situations do not exist. Some secondary school teachers would even consider such situations to be normal. Is it possible for any one teacher to consistently, day in and day out, maintain high interest levels among the students in their classes without letup? What are teachers to do if they have an overwhelming number of preparations and have difficulty coping?

Fortunately, students are often resilient and have been known to succeed in learning subject matter with the aid of unseasoned teachers who have perhaps less than perfect rapport with their students. The challenge of developing effective course materials for distance education is to provide teachers with the support that they need to foster learning, despite the limitations of the distance education environment, while at the same time taking full benefit from the advantages inherent in the media.

The teaching materials must not, and indeed cannot bank on the teacher having the qualities of the super teacher for success. The materials can however be designed for teacher outcomes as well as for student objectives, and promote the qualities that are characteristic of good teachers. Materials must be designed not for the minority of teachers who possess all of the attributes of the ideal teachers, they can well survive without them, but for the ordinary teacher who perhaps slips from the ideals of pure professionalism from time to time. We must not demand a level of dedication and competence that does not exist. We could further add that the ideal student and the ideal context also do not exist.

In recognizing that teachers are human, an instructional designer should not assume that these teachers are enlivened with qualities that in fact they do not possess. Many teachers have been trained in traditional teaching methods, and very few are aware of the possibilities inherent in the new media. They hold various assumptions, and are confident of their abilities to teach according to techniques that conform to the way they have been taught, and that have seemed successful to them in the past. Many of these teachers are uncomfortable with new technology and have little confidence in their ability to take full advantage of

the different media used in distance education. Many are volunteers, so we can suppose that they have some desire to adjust to the new media, but we cannot take this for granted. Teachers have a right to expect the course materials to provide adequate support and sufficient guidance to make them feel secure with the technological media that they will be using.

The teaching required in distance education represents a qualitative change in the teacher's and students' roles and in the approach of both parties towards teaching and learning. Therefore, highly structured materials may be preferable, because they give the teacher and the students greater control over the course content and provide both sides in the educational enterprise with a sense of security.

The course structure should be tight enough to provide this sense of security. However, at the same time, it must be made very clear to teachers that they should feel free to experiment with various approaches to teaching with the new media, and not feel so constrained by the course materials that their creativity is stifled. The course materials are there for the teachers to use and to fall back on as needed. But teachers are to be strongly encouraged to adapt the material and add their own contributions as their confidence in the use of the media grows.

Course materials can be designed that promote those teaching qualities that are felt to be essential for creating a good learning environment. A rigid course structure that enables a teacher to reach stated educational objectives is not necessarily a vice -- and flexibility without goals is no virtue.

The United States Army has for a long time been concerned with the training of their personnel. They accept the inevitability of Murphy's Law. If a mistake is possible, then their personnel are sure to make it. Because of the high costs of mistakes in using expensive equipment, they have conducted a great deal of research on "idiot-proofing" their systems. A new science known as *ergonomics* has been developed to design machinery in such a way as to minimize the possibilities of error. The chances of human error are reduced when the instruments are easier to use correctly. Mistakes are more difficult and sometimes even impossible to make on the new equipment.

Similarly, computer experts used to (and often still do) write manuals that were illegible to anyone who was untrained in the field. Ordinary users found the manuals "unfriendly". Now, computer companies hire non-technical people as writers to ensure that their manuals can be understood by the users. Many computer programs now come equipped with built-in safeguards to protect users from their own errors.

The US army "idiot-proofs" its equipment because it saves lives and expensive equipment. The computer companies increase their sales by making their products more widely accessible. Neither of them gets anywhere by blaming the end user for the deficiencies in their products. They must design the machinery and the software for use by the least able person who will be working with the products.

Similarly, when creating teaching materials, instructional designers cannot assume a superior level of competence or exceptional personal qualities on the part of the teacher. And they cannot blame the teachers for inadequacies in their materials. The materials must be idiot-proof and user-friendly, so as the normal teacher can exploit them with confidence and ease.

The challenge of developing effective course materials for distance education is to make allowances for the special situation and peculiar needs of teachers as well as students who are working together in conditions of isolation. The materials should provide the students and the teachers with the support that they need to foster learning despite the limitations of the distance education environment, while at the same time maximising the advantages inherent in the media being used.

The following are guidelines:

1. The materials should be **SIMPLE**, concentrating on one teaching point at a time, so that the teacher and students are clear about the goals of each lesson. Preferably, each point should be covered in smaller time "chunks" than would be possible in a normal classroom environment.

2. The materials should be very **HIGHLY STRUCTURED.** By simply following the guidelines outlined in the teacher's manual and students' book, the teacher and students can work together to achieve the objectives of the lesson.

3. There should be **MANY REVIEWS** of the material taught in previous lessons. Frequent reviews and summaries of the material should be integrated into each lesson as well as into subsequent lessons.

4. **FREQUENT TESTS** should be made available to evaluate whether or not the material has been mastered, and to help motivate and pace the students. Tests should approach the material to be learned from different directions and be designed to promote success.

5. **HIGH INTEREST** content material should be found which can lower teacher anxiety and stimulate the students, thereby compensating for the teacher's separation from the class. Moreover, this material can be used to promote situations in the classroom which help teachers to establish rapport with their students and thus lower the anxiety of everyone in the learning situation.

6. As much as possible, the materials must be **RELEVANT** to the particular needs of the targeted students, and as much as possible, be perceived by the students to be relevant.

7. **EXTENSION ACTIVITIES** should be made available to the teacher for use with poor students needing remedial help and with strong students who could benefit from advanced parallel learning.

8. This material, although highly structured, must be clearly perceived by the teachers to be **NON-RESTRICTIVE.** It must not be used to constrain imaginative teachers. Rather, it should serve as a basic core upon which teachers can add their own ideas if they wish. Moreover, teachers should be encouraged to depart completely from the course plan when they feel it is appropriate.

9. The material should be **ACTIVITY-ORIENTED** in order to divert teachers away from lecturing to students, and promote active on-task learning in the classroom by students.